



Mission Drift: What to watch out for!

Mission Drift - Part 2

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This is the 2nd article in a series of 3 articles on Mission Drift. The articles describe the problem of mission drift for Christian organisations and measures that leaders can implement to prevent mission drift.

Mission Drift - What to watch out for!

In the first article of this series, I made the case that leaders of Christian organisations need to give far more attention to the problem of mission drift. To this end, it is important to discern the schemes of the enemy, and also to be conscious of our own tendency to drift. Indeed, it is essential to know what to look out for!

Mission Drift – The Unseen Battle

A few months back I had the privilege of leading the board and the executive team of a Christian services organisation through a workshop on mission drift. After the session, the CEO asked me if I had observed signs of mission drift in their organisation. He put me on the spot with this question! Upon reflection, I realised that the question he put to me is the wrong question. The right question is “what more must we do to fight and intercept mission drift?” This question, when phrased in this way, correctly pre-supposes that drift is occurring, and that it will occur unless it is deliberately intercepted.

The apostle Paul writes that ‘our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms’ (Ephesians 6:12, NIV). This passage talks of an ‘unseen battle’ with an invisible adversary. The passage draws our attention to ‘the devil’s schemes’ (Ephesians 6:11b, NIV), implying that these are carefully constructed plans that are both intentional and destructive. One can be certain that the devil has schemes to distort and distract Christian organisations!

Despite the Bible’s emphasis on this unseen battle, I suggest that the evidence tells us that leaders of Christian organisations are not sufficiently aware of, or concerned about, the devil’s schemes to distort and distract Christian organisations. As a result we tend to be unprepared, with weak organisational defences.

Mission Drift by Distortion

I was raised by my Mother, who was a follower of a religion that bore the name ‘Christian.’ I clearly recall my Mum telling me that sin was a figment of the imagination. It follows that her religion had no need for a Saviour, even though it bore the name ‘Christian’!

This life experience helped me to recognise that not every organisation that bears the name Christian promotes Christ as Saviour. Indeed, I have come to realise that many organisations describing themselves as ‘Christian’ make it more difficult for the onlooker to recognise their need for a Saviour! In Article 1, the first example of mission drift was that of a ‘Christian’ aged care organisation. The organisation is highly regarded when it comes to delivering the services they provide to customers,

and rightly acknowledged by stakeholders as a competent and reputable operator.

Mission drift, in this instance, is not program drift but rather a drift towards an increasingly ambiguous variation of the gospel that, as the apostle Paul describes it, “is really no gospel at all” (Galatians 1:7, NIV). Expressed plainly, the gospel message has been and is being replaced by man-centred spirituality. This is evidenced by the organisations statement that “what we seek to do within our chaplaincy is not to proselytise, is not even to evangelise, we are there to acknowledge the spiritual depth of the person and to give expression to that” (1). What does this actually mean? Does this statement promote confidence that the organisation will clearly present Jesus as Saviour to their residents and employees, as would rightly be expected of a ‘Christian’ organisation?

As with the story about my Mother, this type of Christian ambiguity misleads people about their spiritual condition, making it more difficult for a person to acknowledge their need for a Saviour. The inevitable consequence is that Christ’s claim that ‘No one comes to the Father except through me’ (John 14:6b, NIV) is neither honoured nor communicated. How confusing to those who are impacted by the organisation and its message! How harmful to the cause of the gospel! How very different to Paul’s position when he plainly declares “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16, NIV).

Yet here is a telling observation: a great many organisations that have experienced this kind of mission drift through distortion have become highly successful organisations from a human perspective. The YMCA, Red Cross, Harvard, Barclays and the aged care operator that I referred to in Article 1, all started with a clear business purpose and evangelical intent. Each organisation either has drifted, or is drifting, away from its evangelical intent. Each organisation experienced, and continues to experience, significant growth. It seems as if the evil one promotes the growth of organisations that contribute to a lack of clarity about our need for a Saviour!

It may well be that the Lord says of the Christian organisation we support or work for, ‘I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God’ (Revelation 3:2, NIV). It may well be that the meaning of ‘Christian’ has been distorted such that the organisation’s implicit message is making it more difficult for stakeholders to acknowledge their need to believe in Jesus as their saviour and Lord. It may well be that human spirituality or moralism have been substituted for the gospel. What a tragedy that an organisation that bears the name ‘Christian’ can obscure the cross of Christ!

Mission Drift by Distraction

I have observed a second group of Christian organisations where mission drift is occasioned by distraction rather than distortion. Here the heart and the head of the organisation are in the right place, but the organisation’s hands and feet end up in too many places, such that the organisation becomes ineffective in executing its purpose. This is mission drift driven by program drift, which leads to organisational distraction and disorganisation.

These organisations evidence a commitment to evangelism and the cause of the gospel, but they also demonstrate a tendency to be redirected by the diverse needs the organisation comes across, rather than directed by the specific call they received for that particular organisation. It seems that the evil one works hard to transform an effective evangelical organisation into a 'disorganisation' characterised by disparate programs with disjointed activities.

In these situations, the organisation's leaders lose their perspective on the body of Christ in which each part has a different function. As a consequence, the organisation ends up doing things that they are not established to do, but that other Christian organisations are set up to do. This distraction from the unique mission of the organisation leads to reduced effectiveness with growing signs of disorganisation.

The example I gave in Article 1 is one of numerous Christian organisations that have experienced this kind of mission drift. The organisation had a clear founding call and God helped them develop a unique methodology for executing the call to evangelise the cities of Africa. There was an obvious need for urban evangelism, and this need is even greater today as urbanisation in Africa accelerates. In this case, the temptation towards mission drift was underpinned by the intense social needs that characterise Africa. Programs and activities were increasingly redirected by social crises rather than the organisation's specific calling. Over time, certain key donors required that their financial support be used to finance social projects rather than evangelical programs, thereby reinforcing the program drift. Furthermore certain tax jurisdictions promoted social projects whilst the legislation worked against projects that were essentially evangelistic. As a consequence, the activities and programs have become increasingly diverse and more loosely connected to the founding call. Furthermore, funding and resources have been directed towards social programs and away from urban evangelism programs.

This dilemma was captured in the founder's record in which he writes, 'there have been times in the last forty years when such urgent needs and desperate wants have so stared AE in the face that the teams have felt that even though relief work steps out of their primary line of expertise that something simply had to be done in Jesus name to help relieve the suffering' (2 p. 363). There is nothing straightforward about these situations! Indeed, there is nothing easy about the decisions that boards and management face in such situations!

Acts 6 (v1-7) gives a Biblical reference point for handling this type of dilemma. The Church leaders were faced with the practical problem of certain widows being overlooked in the distribution of food. The leaders recognised the need, organised to ensure the leaders were not distracted from their primary calling to pray and proclaim, created a new organisation to address the need of the widows, selected leaders for this organisation, communicated to all stakeholders, and implemented their decisions with care.

In contrast to the practical approach evident in Acts 6, many boards and executive teams make the grave mistake of modifying the organisation's mission statement to accommodate program drift, instead of taking decisive action to intercept mission drift. Put simply, the purpose of the organisation is adjusted to accommodate program drift, whereas the real need is for the organisation

to recommit to the founding purpose and to remove program drift.

A vivid example of this type of drift was brought to my attention whilst presenting at the 2012 CLA Conference. After I had presented, an officer from the Salvation Army came and spoke to me. He expressed deep concern that the Salvation Army had revised their mission statement by taking the word 'basic' out of their mission statement. The mission statement now reads, 'Its mission is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and to meet human needs (previously 'basic human needs') in His name without discrimination' (<http://www.salvationarmy.org/ihq/Mission>).

Clearly this modification makes the Salvation Army mission considerably broader and more loosely connected to the founders and the founding call. It is possible that this modification of the mission was, in some way, an attempt to accommodate existing programs that were not directed at 'basic' human needs. It would be a tragedy if this change fuelled mission drift by distraction!

As an aside, I make mention of the fact that the Salvation Army was one of two organisations that I referred to in my presentation as examples of organisations that had built sound defences against mission drift. The concern raised by the Salvation Army officer illustrates the need for constant vigilance to guard against mission drift. Past successes cannot be relied upon!

Early Indicators of Mission Drift by Distortion:

1. Division – Larry Reed writes, “When Christian organisations find it difficult to find people with these (management) skills among the Christian community, they begin to look outside. As these people move up in the ranks of the organisation and become leaders, they can move the organisation away from its Christian commitment” (3). Jesus says, “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (Luke 11:23, NIV). It follows that where the management team and the board increasingly take on those who do not have a heart for the gospel, then the evangelical intent of the organisation will be subjected to increasing opposition.
2. Deviation – “As organisations grow and become more sophisticated they become less accountable to the original group that got them started, and more accountable to the people who provide their funding and to their professional peers” (3). The outworking of this is that the evangelical motivation and purpose of the original group gets watered down, and the social purpose becomes preeminent. This is normally evidenced by the increasing use of ambiguous terms such as 'Christian values,' 'Christian care,' and 'Christian communities,' labels that are designed to make the meaning of 'Christian' more inclusive and more acceptable to the broader population.
3. Dishonesty – Deviation leads to a subtle form of dishonesty about one's allegiances and purpose. One illustration of this is the account of a past president of Brown University who is reported to have said, “When I speak in Baptist Churches, Brown is a church-related university. When I speak to the officers of the educational foundations, Brown is a university” (4 p. 823).
4. Departmentalisation – This occurs when mission drift is well underway. It represents an

attempt by some to preserve the originating purpose and evangelical intent. An example of this is where the evangelical purpose of an organisation gets specifically delegated to the chaplaincy program. The outcome, in such circumstances, is that certain programs are retained or established in recognition of the spiritual heritage. Typically, these programs and departments become separated from the main focus of the organisation and they fall away with time.

Early indicators of Mission Drift by Distraction:

1. Dilution – In this context, dilution refers to the increase in the number of programs and activities that the organisation engages in, to the detriment of its originating purpose and core program(s). The evangelical intent remains but the founding call loses its clarity.
2. Disorganisation – Disorganisation is the outworking of distraction and dilution as described above. The organisation becomes too complex to operate effectively, too complex to generate support for, and too complex to govern. As programs become more diverse, a greater range of competencies is required, additional systems are needed, messaging for supporters becomes more difficult, and the governance challenge is intensified. The result is growing ‘disorganisation’.
3. Deterioration – Disorganisation leads to deterioration in the quality of the programs that the programs run by the organisation. This deterioration is often most evident in the programs that are closest to the founding purpose of the organisation as funding and expertise have been diverted to other programs.
4. Disengagement – in these situations, people with a commitment to the founding purpose gradually become disillusioned as the organisational challenges are just ‘too hard’ due to program drift. The unpleasant side of these situations is that discouragement and blame become more prevalent as passion gives way to weariness, and hope gives way to despair.

What then shall we do?

The answer is to build defences that intercept mission drift, and to embed into the organisation anything that helps the organisation deliver its specific purpose. This is the subject of the next article.

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